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LAW ENFORCEMENT TECHNOLOGY


# Prevailing in prevention and protection

## *D.A.R.E. officers arm country's children with weapons of knowledge and confidence to "just say no"*

***By Jennifer Mertens***

D.A.R.E. is not just about drug prevention. Or officers. Or even community service. It's about kids. And most importantly, building relationships. D.A.R.E. is a community in itself — one devoted to making a difference in the lives of children.

"The benefit, besides getting a good understanding and foundation on drug prevention, is that the kids get to see officers in a totally different light," says Sgt. Alan Green of the Los Angeles Police Department D.A.R.E. Section. "They see them as a friend. They see them as a person they do not have to be afraid of. They see someone that's there to help them."

D.A.R.E. America Executive Director Charlie Parsons retired from the FBI in 1996 after spending 27 years combating crime, of which the last five were invested as head of the bureau's Los Angeles Division. It was at that time he decided to make a career change: from fighting crime to preventing it, starting with the country's youngest citizens — its children.

"Law enforcement, I think," begins Parsons, "realizes better than most that we can't totally arrest our way out of the problem. We do have to have enforcement and interdiction, but the long-


D.A.R.E. America

**D.A.R.E. promotes substance and violence-free environments for children of all ages. After-school activities are part of the organization's way of keeping students off drugs and active in their communities.**

term solution is education and to get to the kids at an early age so they don't become addicted and hopefully so they don't even experiment."

This year D.A.R.E. celebrates its 20th anniversary as the world's largest drug and violence prevention program. D.A.R.E. originated in Los Angeles in 1983. Following the successful pilot program that involved 10 officers and the cooperation of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the drug education program frenzy spread rapidly. It is now taught in over 10,000 communities nationwide, 75 to 80 percent of school districts, and internationally, in 54 countries. "The rest of the world has the same problem we do when it comes to substance abuse," says Parsons. Sixty to 75 percent of crime, he says, is related to this abuse.

The D.A.R.E. program is also trying to dispel a normative belief among school-aged children regarding the use of drugs among their peers. "There's a tendency to think everybody's doing it," says Parsons. A part of the D.A.R.E. educational process is realizing that statement is false. A very common scenario, he adds, is a child approached by a parent, asking how many students in the child's school are involved with drugs. "Oh, everybody," Parsons says the child will most likely say. "People that abuse substances and illegal drugs are a minority." The same goes for any situation involving misbehavior. "They think that if there's a gang problem, everybody's a gangbanger," he adds. "The truth is it's a very small percentage. That's a very critical part of the training."

The core of the D.A.R.E. initiative is arming children with the informational weapons needed to make educated decisions regarding the use of controlled substances. "How you can you make a decision if you don't have all the information?" questions Officer John Lewicki of the Fort Atkinson (Wisconsin) Police Department.

Whether teaching children at 365 public elementary schools, 84 middle schools and 45 high schools as Green organizes for the Los Angeles area, or five elementary schools as Lewicki does for the small town of Fort Atkinson, D.A.R.E. relays the same message. "When it comes time to make a choice, hopefully they'll fall back on what they learned in D.A.R.E. about the consequences of drug use and they'll choose not to use," Lewicki says.

## The earlier, the better

Within the large D.A.R.E. program are individual curriculums that target various grades of school children. The first is aimed at elementary students or those in kindergarten through fourth grade. "It is very simple and geared a lot toward safety," says Parsons. For young students as these, D.A.R.E. is not necessarily about drug prevention, but learning to avoid dangerous situations such as taking substances from a medicine cabinet or handling items with a poison label. This also includes safety when approached by strangers. D.A.R.E. officers teach students at this beginning level to establish a code word with their parents. If approached by a stranger, the child is taught to ask for the code word and if the person does not know it, to leave the area immediately. "I can't tell you how frequently I receive a phone call or a letter in which some kid credits D.A.R.E. with their not being kidnapped," Parsons adds.

The original 1983 D.A.R.E. curriculum was designed for the elementary school level and is offered during fifth or sixth grade, depending on the organization of the school district. Children at this age receive D.A.R.E. classes before entering middle school, where "they are more exposed to the pressures and more likely to experiment," says Parsons.

*"We do have to have enforcement and interdiction, but the long-term solution is education and to get kids at an early age..."*

The basic knowledge of "what is a drug?" is taught at this level. "A lot of these kids don't even consider alcohol a drug," says Lewicki. "In D.A.R.E., we define a drug as any substance other than food that has an effect on your mind or body." In his classes of 10 and 11 year olds, Lewicki teaches the basics of identifying drugs and also identifying what abuse and misuse is. Many children don't consider prescriptions or over-the-counter medications drugs. "And, we get into that too," says Lewicki. "And how those can be abused if they don't follow the directions on the package."

At this age level, D.A.R.E. officers begin to teach students the consequences of using controlled substances. Parsons says the program stresses to students that every action has a consequence. If they do decide to use drugs, what would be the legal, health and other consequences? "Do you want to expose your body to that?" questions Parsons. "Do you want to perhaps go to jail and not be able to pursue the career that you want? Is it worth it? That's another element of the program."

In Fort Atkinson, Lewicki teaches approximately 200 local fifth grade students not only the importance of saying no, but how to "save face" in tough situations. "All the kids want to learn is how to say 'no' but still be cool," he says. What D.A.R.E. teaches children is different ways to say no and quickly change the conversation when finding themselves in a situation involving drug use. "And, I think what they learn in D.A.R.E. is they don't have to do these things to conform with the rest of the group," he adds.

The middle school program is a continuance of the fifth- or sixth-grade curriculum. For this age group, the training revisits lessons taught in earlier grades. This, says Parsons, is very important for the students' ability to retain information. Included in the middle school session is also additional discussion regarding gangs, anger management and conflict resolution. "Officers are trying to give the children the tools to resist drugs," says Parsons. "It's not 'just say no.' That's a very simplistic approach."

## Older and wiser

Generally, students are sophomores in high school when they receive the final session of D.A.R.E. training. Role-playing becomes a large part of the educational process, putting students in realistic, peer pressure-driven situations. For example, the D.A.R.E. instructor may present a video to their class, showing a teen taken to a party by a friend. "Everybody at the party is getting drunk, including their friend, who now wants to drive home," explains Parsons. The video is turned off and discussion groups formed. "What do you do?" he says the officers would ask the students. "How do you get yourself out of this situation? What are your options? What are the consequences?"

D.A.R.E. officers also stress to the teens that many states have adopted a zero-tolerance law for drinking and driving. "It's not a preachy thing," says Parsons. "It's a fact. If you get caught with liquor on your breath, in many states you lose your driver's license, which is very important to a kid." The D.A.R.E. curriculum, therefore, adapts to the unique needs of this age group.

The final curriculum associated with D.A.R.E. is the parent program. This is not to teach parents "how to parent," stresses Parsons. It is, however, a short educational program that aids parents in addressing the issues surrounding substance abuse. "The best drug prevention program in the world is not D.A.R.E., but a parent sitting down at the kitchen table telling their kids what they really think and that they don't want them to use drugs and they would be very disappointed," says Parsons. A collateral benefit of D.A.R.E., he says, is that the program is a catalyst for those conversations.

Lewicki offers much encouragement for parents to become involved. A letter is sent home the very first week explaining D.A.R.E., what the class will try to accomplish, and making the parents aware that Lewicki is available to discuss questions or concerns they may have. "The most untapped resource in the D.A.R.E. program is the parents," says Green. "We're looking for the open line of communication. We want parents to talk to their kids about the pressures they're going through."

Green stresses to officers the first day of each D.A.R.E. training session that the best drug prevention program in the world is parental involvement. A conversation a child may have had with their parent many times invokes a discussion during a D.A.R.E. class. "We talk a lot each lesson not just about drugs, but about what's going on in their lives," says Lewicki. The students might say, "My dad says this. Or my mom says this. It gives us a chance to discuss it. By the end of the class, they have learned, for example, that there have been people who died the first time they tried cocaine."

## What's not new

What's not new with D.A.R.E. is the positive impact this prevention program continues to make on officers, parents, students and entire communities alike. "We have half as many people in this country using drugs today as we did in 1983," says Parsons. "That's not new and it's not a secret, but it is not widely known."

"We've still got a long way to go,"

D.A.R.E.®

he adds. “But, people sometimes tend to despair and say ‘This is an overwhelming problem and we’ll never be able to handle it,’ not realizing what we need to do is stay focused and put more resources into this area.”

When an officer appears in a classroom, it is a very important event in a child’s school day. “This is the first exposure that most children ever have to law enforcement or real authority, for that matter,” says Parsons. “And it’s a very positive one. They see a police officer in a non-threatening situation. They learn that he or she is a human being — that they have children too. Many of them are funny, or kind, or whatever. They don’t have the stereotype of this big, bad police person.”

Lewicki sees firsthand the impact that he makes as Fort Atkinson’s D.A.R.E. officer. “They see that it’s more than just some person going by in a squad car. They can identify with that person and they have a relationship with that person.”

He hopes that in coming years, the same students he taught D.A.R.E. as fifth graders will come to him if faced with a problem. “Well, I can call Officer Lewicki,” he hopes they will say on those rough days. “Whereas, if they didn’t know any of the police officers at the department personally, they may never make that call or ask that question.”

During the years he was an active D.A.R.E. instructor, Green says there were many times he was approached by his students and introduced to their parents, even as the students aged. “It’s a very good feeling that these kids remembered who I was and I had an impact on their lives,” he says. “That’s very rewarding.”

Even more substantial was the effect it had on his personal life. A new parent when he started with D.A.R.E., Green says it made him a better parent “because I understood a lot of things on why kids did things a certain way.”

This is one of the reasons D.A.R.E. has been so widely accepted by law enforcement worldwide and one of the main benefits it has brought to the community policing efforts of a department. Another is the fact that D.A.R.E. brings officers into the schools, making an impression on those concerned with safety in the schools. “We’ve had instances where we’ve prevented Columbine-type situations from happening because there was a D.A.R.E. officer there,” says Parsons.

Lewicki also sees the importance of D.A.R.E. and its benefits on a department. “What I think happens, aside from the drug part, is the relationship that a police officer can build with the community,” he says. “That to me, is just as important.”

The impact of D.A.R.E. on the D.A.R.E. officer is one “I don’t think was ever imagined when this program started,” says Parsons. “Their perception of the public that they serve is different. They understand they’re dealing with the children from that high-crime area and realize those kids have to live there and are more exposed to harm than they are and also, that drugs are critical reasons for the crime in any area.”

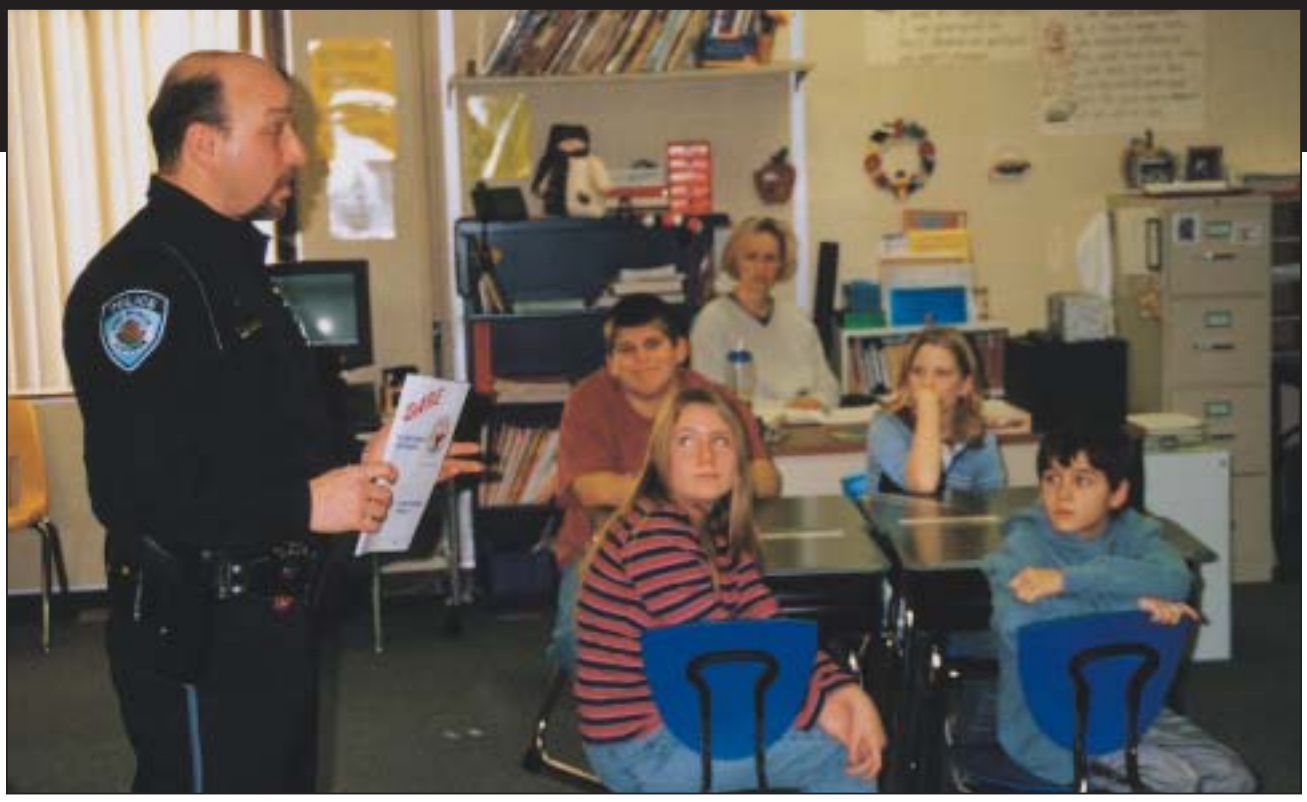
“You see kids as a product of the community,” says Green. “Sometimes police work can be cynical, but in this role it’s not. While I was working the streets of Hollywood and Wilshire, every time I arrested a kid or had to take a kid out of a home, I’d ask the parents when was the last time they had a meal with them. Years.”

He adds, “Kids are looking for two things: belonging and recognition. We feel that when an officer goes in that classroom, they offer those things.”

## What is new

Starting this school year, a brand new curriculum has been introduced for the D.A.R.E. programs. The new elementary lesson plan is already being taught in schools around the nation. The middle school program is expected to be implemented before Christmas and will be followed eventually by the high school lessons.

The driving force behind this curriculum facelift is a $15 million



**Officer John Lewicki of the Fort Atkinson Police Department teaches a fifth-grade D.A.R.E. class at Purdy Elementary School.**

research grant given to the University of Akron by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the largest health philanthropy in the world. The process to develop the gold-standard curriculum for drug prevention, as Parsons calls it, began a few years ago. This is also tied to a five-year longitudinal evaluation being completed to ensure the programs' effectiveness. Last spring marked the end of the second year. Six major metropolitan school districts have participated in this research, involving control groups receiving "old" D.A.R.E. and experimental groups learning "new" D.A.R.E. So far, the results have been very positive, says Parsons.

The main difference in the programs is the focus on group learning and role-playing. An emphasis has been placed on the D.A.R.E. instructor to act as a facilitator, rather than a lecturer. "We want them to facilitate and kids to be involved with more critical thinking and the officer with reflective thinking," says Green. "The key phrase now is you want the officer to become the 'guide on the side as opposed to the sage on the stage.'"

Lewicki received his training with the new curriculum, so he incorporated some of the new with the old during last year's D.A.R.E. lessons. This year, the new program is in full swing with the fifth-graders in Fort Atkinson. "We did a lot of role-playing and the kids eat that up," he says. "They love getting up in front of the class. The whole idea here is to keep them energized and keep them interested. I remember sitting in a classroom and what was more boring than some guy coming in and talking to you about whatever? The next thing you know you're doodling or daydreaming."

Retention is much better, all three D.A.R.E. officers agree, when students are an intricate part of the lesson versus merely observers. In Lewicki's classes, a Hollywood spin is put on the role-playing. "Before we start, we do the 'lights, camera, action,' " he says with a laugh. "Because we're in Hollywood now. This is for real actors."

## Training is tough

Since 1983, over 50,000 uniformed law enforcement officers in the United States have completed two weeks of intense training to become a D.A.R.E. officer. "It was a tough school," says Lewicki. "It was the hardest training I ever went through. But, I came away from there with a sense of 'the kids are worth it.'"

As a non-profit organization, D.A.R.E. offers training at no charge to the officers chosen to be their department's D.A.R.E. representatives. Also, after completing the training, officers are provided with the workbooks needed for the first year of teaching the program and all the instruction materials necessary for a successful class, including video tapes, charts, officer guides and lesson plans.

D.A.R.E. training is at the heart of Green. He coordinates all training for the California State D.A.R.E. Training Center, based in Los Angeles. This draws officers from all over the country for eight sessions per year, graduating approximately 30 officers from each two-week training. This only includes basic D.A.R.E. training. Other sessions for

middle school, high school, parent groups, etc. are offered. “We’re very busy,” he says. Even still, “I am extremely proud of the D.A.R.E. officer training,” he adds. “It’s very hard to explain to somebody, even someone in law enforcement, what this training is like if they haven’t gone through it. It is the most challenging and intense training to date, but it is also the most rewarding for officers. Ultimately, they will be making changes and motivating, directing and guiding young lives.”

Instructor training covers everything from updates on narcotics to learning the D.A.R.E. curriculum as well as a chemical dependency


**Daren the Lion is D.A.R.E.’s official mascot.**

overview, classroom management skills and modalities of learning. One of the reasons Green is proud of the instructor training is the partnership with education.

This partnership is very important to the city of Fort Atkinson. “We don’t budget for D.A.R.E.,” says Lewicki. “Everybody together makes it happen.” ‘Everybody’ includes the school district, which pays for materials, and parent-teacher organizations and civic groups that contribute funds. He also credits Fort Atkinson program’s success to the department’s chief, Anthony Brus. “He lets me run with it,” says Lewicki. “He’s very supportive of the program. I’ve been told, ‘just make it work,’ whether that meant a change in hours or whatever.”

D.A.R.E. officers are chosen by their chiefs to take part in this unique fraternity of uniformed officers. The ability to relate to people and children and be a teacher are qualities each D.A.R.E. officer must possess. The common denominator among D.A.R.E. officers, Parsons says, is their passion for the job. “They really care about the kids and that is hard to quantify, but it’s a very important ingredient,” he adds. “They want to make a difference.”

“I would tell other officers who are interested in being a D.A.R.E. instructor: Be prepared to put in some long hours, long days,” says Lewicki. “It’s very demanding, yet I can almost guarantee you when you’re done with the two weeks, it will be the best training you’ve ever had and it’s so rewarding and a sense of accomplishment that you made it.”

## Prevention pays

“I know there’s controversy out there and a lot of discussions if D.A.R.E. is effective and are we really keeping kids off drugs?” says Lewicki. “My opinion is: I think it helps. It surely can’t hurt.”

Prevention may not be a lecture to a class of fifth-graders or even a video discussion involving high school sophomores. It is a relationship with a D.A.R.E. officer. It is raising awareness to the pressures associated with the media and peers. It is addressing those real-life pressures with parents and their children.

“All I ask if anybody is not sure — just go sit in a classroom and watch the magic that takes place with an uniformed officer that knows the curriculum and kids that are anxious to learn,” says Green.

“For whatever is invested in the training or the instructor, the end result is that this has an impact on young people’s lives and I can’t think of many things that are more important than that,” says Lewicki. “The kids are the future and we have to get them started on the right foot.” ■

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